



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Treatment of Negro-American Workers by the AFL and the CIO in the San Francisco Bay Area

Author(s): Fred Stripp

Source: *Social Forces*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Mar., 1950), pp. 330-332

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2572020>

Accessed: 14/06/2014 16:52

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Oxford University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Social Forces*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE TREATMENT OF NEGRO-AMERICAN WORKERS BY THE AFL AND THE CIO IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

FRED STRIPP

University of California

THE problem of the Negro worker touches every aspect of the Nation's life. Two major contributions to that understanding in this decade have been Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*. Of this complex problem, the writer has selected as one area for intensive investigation the treatment of Negro-American workers by the AFL and the CIO in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Although the black artisan in the South outnumbered the white 100,000 to 20,000 at the close of the Civil War, the bulk of the four million slaves had been engaged in agriculture and domestic service. Ninety percent were still in these two categories in 1890. The few who had broken out of these occupational ruts were, in the main, strike breakers. The Negro who found himself shut out of the job because he couldn't get in the union and shut out of the union because he couldn't get the job was a willing strike breaker. He helped defeat the white worker's eight-hour-day crusade and broke his strikes in the mines, on the docks, in the stockyards, in the clothing factories, among the teamsters, on the railroads, in the metal trades, and in the steel mills.

The black worker's dependence upon the slave owner in days of bondage was easily transferred to dependence upon the employer in post-war days of freedom. Agriculture and domestic service gave him no union experience and for decades he allied himself with management against the union in the struggles of the labor movement. Furthermore he was encouraged to break strike by his own leadership. Ministers, YMCA secretaries, and Urban League officials actually recruited strike breakers from their Negro-American clientele. White unionists naturally resented what they contemptuously referred to as "Nigger-scabs," and color solidarity was long delayed in the labor movement. The United Mine Workers and the International Ladies' Garment Workers, however, helped to bridge the chasm by admitting colored strike breakers to their unions even after their strikes had been defeated. As strike breaking paid off with skilled jobs and union experiences in a dozen major in-

dustries outside agriculture and domestic service, Negro-Americans gradually abandoned the practice.

A second phenomenon even more helpful to the Negro-American than strike breaking has been the labor vacuum. When workers have been in great demand, color caste has temporarily receded and new job opportunities have come to Negro-American workers. In California the vacuum has not been limited to periods of world war, but began in 1850, following the discovery of gold, to draw the Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Mexicans in chronological order to take the jobs the North-European-Americans did not want. The minorities were welcomed at first during economic "boom periods," but during "bust periods" were denied entry, one after another, by exclusionist legislation punctuating various points in 84 years of racio-economic agitation. The Negro-American came to California late in time when the labor vacuum of World War II brought him by the thousands. He has not yet come in great numbers, however, and even in 1949 Philadelphia had three times as many Negro-Americans as the entire State of California. So has New York City. A significant percentage of the thousands drawn to the San Francisco Bay Area by the war-time labor vacuum have come into contact with the labor unions, however, many for the first time.

Some of the AFL unions shut out the Negro-American. Others relaxed the pre-war barriers and let him in. Many locals initiated their first Negro-American as a result of the World War II manpower shortage. A few AFL unions had been admitting Negro-Americans for years and continued to admit increased numbers during the emergency production period.

A total of 163 AFL locals were contacted in the San Francisco Bay Area in this study. They reported 195,951 members, 18,953 of whom were Negro-American, a 9.6 percentage. The Laborers, the Culinary Workers, the Molders, the Building Service Employees, and the Carpenters accounted for 55 percent of the Negro workers reported by

all 163 AFL locals covered in the Bay Region. Fifty-five locals, representing 50,000 AFL trade unionists, reported no Negro members. The largest locals in the all-white group are the Seafarers, Plumbers and Steamfitters Local 38, Machinists Local 68, Masters, Mates, and Pilots Local 90, Butchers Local 115, and Musicians Local 6. There were 45 locals, on the other hand, reporting 100 or more Negro members.

Thirty-three AFL unions were able to furnish figures for pre-war, peak-war, and post-war Negro membership, reporting 890 Negroes in the pre-war era (860 of these in Laborers and Building Service Employees), 29,314 in the peak-war period, and 7,670 in post-war 1948. The significant figure is not the swollen peak-war total of 29,314, but the post-war figure for May, 1948 of 7,670. Thousands of war workers naturally lost their jobs when the war ended, white workers as well as Negro workers. Boilermakers Local 6, for a single example, dropped 31,000 white workers in the post-war era. Thus the important emphasis for our study of these 33 locals out of the 163 total contacted is the contrast between the 890 Negro unionists in the pre-war days and the 7,670 Negroes still in the 33 unions 33 months after VJ Day. Many of the AFL leaders indicated that the same contrast would hold in their unions, but the actual figures were not available. The increase may or may not have been as high as the 850 percent in the 33 unions, but from the reports of the other 75 AFL locals with Negro membership, it was a striking increase over the pre-war ratio.

Important legal and psychological gains have come to the Negro-American in the Bay Area AFL also, not the least of these being the mixed unions which have replaced the "Jim Crow" auxiliaries among the Boilermakers. A 7-0 decision against the segregated auxiliary when supported by the closed shop was rendered by the California Supreme Court. Boilermakers 39 and Welders and Burners 681 on the Oakland side and Boilermakers 6 and Welders and Burners 1330 on the San Francisco side now practice mixed membership, meeting in the same union hall. The universal transfer card is yet to come, but the James-Marinship case is a landmark for the Negro worker.

The Hotel and Restaurant Workers, Commercial Telegraphers, Blacksmiths, Railway Clerks, and Railway Carmen have removed the color bar from their membership requirements in the respective constitutions. Most Machinists' locals in the Bay

Region admit Negroes despite the exclusion clause in the lodge ritual. The Carpenters, with a poor national record on color concord and almost no Negro carpenters in the Bay Area affiliates prior to the war, had 2,000 Negro members among a 15,000 total membership in May of 1948. Such gains are more than legal and numerical; they are psychological as well. The Negro-American's morale improves with each of these hard won steps in the long road to equality.

In the important job category of transportation the Negro-American is still, for the most part, "on the outside looking in." The teamster affiliates are almost exclusively white and, in labor terminology, "tight outfits, difficult to crack." AFL water transport is 100 percent white in the Bay Area. And, while some gains have been made in streetcar and railroad transport, the Negro's chief place in transportation is in such non-transporting affiliates as the Warehousemen and the Cannery Workers.

In the professional and technical classifications the Negro-American has his smallest opportunity. While he holds as high as 11.2 percent of the union membership in the Building Trades, 12.8 percent in Food, Clothing, and Laundry locals, and 20.2 percent in the Service groups, he holds only 3 percent of the cards in Professional and Technical unions. He faces here the twin handicaps of lack of training and racial discrimination.

Despite these less encouraging aspects of the picture the present writer's field work has found the Negro-American worker marking up substantial numerical and psychological gains in the AFL locals of the San Francisco Bay Area from the pre-war years to the post-war month of May, 1948.

The CIO has followed the practice of organizing the Negro from the very inception of the "one big union." In the Bay Area the present writer contacted 26 major CIO unions with 42 locals reporting 55,205 members, among them 7,557 Negro-Americans. They hold 2,500 membership cards in the Marine Cooks and Stewards among 7,000 members. They hold 2,200 of Longshore Local 6's 15,000 cards. The remaining 2,857 Negro-American CIO members are scattered among 24 major CIO unions with a membership of 48,205. Five CIO locals of the 42 reporting have no Negroes and nine more have ten or less. The 7,557 Negro members of the Bay Area CIO affiliates make up 13.6 percent of 55,205 CIO unionists, a percentage comparing favorably to the AFL's 9.6 percent.

Five CIO unions, representing 18,600 members,

reported 6 Negro members prior to the war and 3,127 after the war. Most of the unions had no pre-war figures, some, indeed, coming into being after the war was over; but all have been affected by the labor vacuum drawing thousands of Negro-Americans into the Bay Area. In cases where Negro membership has been proportionally low in CIO units, the leadership has volunteered dissatisfaction with the situation, often pointing to discriminatory management as the controlling factor in hiring. The AFL leaders gave ample support to this CIO indictment of management. FEPC records on the West Coast and in the national office suggest that the labor leadership is probably correct. Mr. Harry Kingman, FEPC administrator on the West Coast during the war, estimated that 10 percent of the FEPC cases handled involved labor unions and 70 percent involved management. Miss Winifred Raushenbush gave figures at the national level of 6.5 percent for unions and 70 percent for management.¹

Two major conclusions have come out of the present writer's study in the Bay Area. The first is that the most important single influence on the Negro-American worker in the San Francisco Bay Area and on the AFL and CIO with reference to the Negro-American has been the war time labor vacuum of the early 'forties. It drew the Negro to the Bay Region in the first place. It called him even when he was an unskilled illiterate. It gave him thousands of job opportunities and with many of them his first union experience. It helped to overcome the white worker's antagonism to the Negro's joining the union and the Negro worker's prejudice against the union, both traceable in part to the day of the Negro strike breaker. It helped make possible the James-Marinship Decision which eliminated the Boilermakers' Jim Crow Union in the Bay Region. It made it possible for the Negro-American to enter crafts without the requisite skills and pick them up on the job, often with the

actual help of white workers. Its effect outlasted the war in terms of the residue of jobs and union memberships; the 26,510 union memberships held by Negro-Americans in the 205 locals studied is an imposing figure when placed beside the entire Negro population count of approximately 4,500 in the late 'thirties in San Francisco. The 38 locals among the 205 who could give pre-war and post-war figures showed 896 Negroes before and 10,797 in May of 1948. Of all 205 locals contacted the Negro-American holds 10.5 percent of 251,156 memberships, which compares with his population ratio of 4.7 percent. The war labor vacuum, moreover, gave the liberal labor leader in the AFL and in the CIO an unprecedented opportunity to throw his weight behind the Negro-American's effort to move up the economic ladder as an American without being stopped because he was a Negro. It gave the Negro-American the chance to be what many labor leaders have called him during the writer's field work, "a good union man." It gave the whites and Negroes a chance to show that they *can* work together, a fact not even they were quite certain about before the war. Business agents, secretaries, and presidents of many locals repeatedly emphasized that the more the two groups worked side by side and the oftener they met in the same union hall the *better* they got along.

The second major conclusion is that the enactment of FEPC legislation could eliminate discrimination by both the employer and the union. Such legislation could also mitigate the losses in Negro-American jobs and union cards which will come in the event of a depression. The gains reported in this study are solid gains, both numerically and psychologically. Even a depression will not wipe them out completely, but FEPC legislation at the State or national level would be an immediate and practical answer to the Negro-American worker's need for job security. Both the AFL and the CIO at the national level, at the State level in California, and at the local level in the Bay Region endorse the FEPC.

¹ Winifred Raushenbush, *Jobs Without Creed or Color*, pp. 15, 17.